

# THE SITUATION IN JAVA

*A Composite of Lectures delivered before the  
Netherlands Study Group in New York City on  
Nov. 5, 1945, and the Overseas Press Club in  
New York City on November 14, 1945.*

*by*

DR. FRANS H. VISMAN

Member of the Council of the Netherlands-Indies,  
Batavia, Java, 1936—1941.

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## LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

Java is very much in the news these days. There is almost daily bloodshed on all sides concerned.

What is at the core of the disturbances of law and order in Java?

Netherlands Indies society is composed of different races and religions. Here live 70 million Indonesians, 1,200,000 Chinese, and 250,000 Netherlanders besides other smaller groups. 90% of this society is Mohammedan, the other 10% are Christian, Hindu, Confucian, or pagan. The Indonesians, collective name for the indigenous peoples, are far from a coherent group: 25 main languages are spoken in addition to numerous minor languages and dialects, and living in an archipelago of many islands kept them isolated from one another.

It would go beyond the limits of this address if I tried to tell you in detail how and to what extent unity has been created out of this diversity. An extensive system of communications, education, and the introduction into this polyglot world of two general languages, Dutch and Malay, were the principal means of achieving unity or at least coherence. The establishment of social services, participation of all the groups in these social services, representation of all the population groups in the administration



as well as representation and cooperation of all these groups in the local, provincial and central representative councils, served the same purpose.

These unifying measures have resulted in a society in which the diverse indigenous peoples are still living in their original diversification, but tendencies to amalgamate among themselves and to cooperate with the different non-native groups were strong in the gradually broadening top layer of this society, where peoples of Indonesian, Netherlands, and Chinese origins were united, working and leading side by side.

However, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that only a strong government could achieve this result. Naturally social tensions were present in this society in which both more and less advanced groups live together and in which the less advanced groups show a healthy tendency to improve their position and have a right to government assistance for this purpose. Persons of different race and religion in the Indies got along with one another better than in other dependent areas. The Dutch are hampered by less racial consciousness than most other western peoples. But this does not mean that racial and religious intolerance was entirely absent. Intolerance in contacts between different races is always a potential source of friction. But in the Netherlands Indies wise policies kept it dormant, and the hope was justified that this potential racial and religious intolerance would gradually cease to exist.

About 1901 nationalistic feelings arose within the Indonesians and when this nationalism showed a tendency to exclude non-native groups, another possible source of friction was born.

The Netherlands Indies diversified society, where both more and less educated people enjoy the same rights of freedom of press and speech, is by its very nature very sensitive to propaganda. This is intensified by the fact that this society was and still is in a dangerous transition period in which all sorts of theories and slogans are current, while the social differences are not yet sufficiently bridged and the mass of the population has not yet developed sufficiently to distinguish and to criticize the slogans and theories.

This situation explains why three times in this century Netherlands Indies society has come to grief on social, racial and nationalistic issues. In 1912 Javanese religious nationalists turned against



the Chinese and burned down Chinese quarters in the town of Koedoes. In 1926 an extensive communist plot threatened the very foundations of Netherlands Indies society. A premature explosion in Batavia revealed the plot and the extreme methods of those involved. In 1929 a small minority of extreme Javanese nationalists under Soekarno attempted to supplant the prevalent order. In these cases force had to be used against violence.

The Netherlands Indies Government, however, understood that a policy for handling unrest could not be limited to preventive and repressive measures. The government understood that it would only be possible to ease the tension by getting at the root of the trouble. A broad program of enlightenment, advancement, and increased participation in the administration by Indonesians and of embedding nationalistic feelings in representative councils, put into effect at the beginning of this century, has therefore been broadened and accelerated since then.

It will always be a matter of controversy whether a policy of enlightenment and advancement of indigenous peoples goes quickly enough and far enough. The answer will vary as to the specific group or class one has in mind. But it is a fact that in the nineteen twenties restive movements in the mass of the population in the main islands of Java, Sumatra and Celebes proved upon investigation to be primarily the result of aversion to too much government interference meant to improve their condition. The mass of the population could not keep up with the pace of reforms which, by the way, the intellectuals deemed too slow.

However, this broad program of enlightenment, advancement, participation and representation proved on the whole to be beneficial. In the thirties the Indonesian political parties, several of which until then had not cooperated with the Government, changed their policy from non-cooperation to cooperation. They understood that the Indies as a whole would benefit if all groups cooperated. So leftist-Indonesian parties formed the so-called "Gaboengan Politiek Indonesia," abbreviated into "Gapi," a federation with the goal of attaining full self-government for the Indies and a status equal to the Netherlands *within* a Netherlands Commonwealth.

The "Gapi" brought this issue to the fore before a Commission, established in 1940 by Governor-General Van Starckenborgh to in-



investigate the political wishes of the people in order to prepare progressive political reforms. I had the honor of presiding over that Commission. The Commission's report was finished a few days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. One copy of the report reached the United States and was reprinted here.<sup>1</sup>

The Commission followed the American procedure of holding hearings all over the Indies. All parties and groups were heard, including the Indonesian leftists.

According to the findings of the Commission, political interest in the Indies was confined to a relatively small group. The total membership of all political societies in 1941 was 115,000. Other figures showing that modern development of the masses is still in its infancy or at least in its adolescence are: the total number of subscribers to Malay newspapers was 53,000, the Indonesian membership of labor unions numbered 187,500. The Commission was struck by the political disunity even among the relatively small group of Indonesian leftists. But there was unanimity on one thing: none of the groups asked for independence. They all wanted to stay within the Netherlands Commonwealth, although in a different set-up than existed at that time. The most extreme proposal put forward before the Commission was that of the "Gapi," see above, who wanted a federative tie between the Netherlands and the Netherlands Indies. This is remarkable when one considers that 90% of the Indies is Mohammedan. In the Philippines 90% of the people are Christian and thus the population more nearly resembles Western peoples than do the Mohammedans.

The Commission's results prove that there is no reason to ascribe the present disturbances in the Netherlands Indies to discontent with the past policies of the Netherlands Government. Otherwise there would not have been such a unanimous wish to remain in the Netherlands Commonwealth. Among the members of the Commission were two men now prominent in the independence movement in the Indies, Professor Soepomo and Dr. Moelila. Both men signed the Commission's report. Others now prominent in the independence movement appeared before the Commission and adhered to the proposal not to leave the Netherlands Commonwealth.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Broek of the University of California has made a survey of the report in English, see "Pacific Affairs," September 1943.



The question arises, why is independence being sought now, whereas when the Japanese entered the Indies all groups wanted to stay within the Netherlands Commonwealth? Part of the answer lies in increased feelings of nationalism, part lies in Japanese propaganda.

A wave of nationalism is sweeping through Southeast Asia. The beginnings of this wave in the Indies were already present before the war as I pointed out before. The Dutch themselves have laid the foundation of nationalism in the Indies by bringing the Indonesian peoples together in one administration. The Dutch recognized its building and driving force if kept in constructive and non-restrictive channels. For this reason they endeavored to utilize this nationalism in representative councils, hoping to unify the nationalists with the non-native inhabitants of the country. Until the Japanese invasion there were reasons to believe that this policy would be successful. A growing sense of community developed among the different races. This was most promising for this corner of the world destined to be a meeting place of East and West and of different Eastern races. Even before the war the Dutch were ready to follow up the reforms of the nineteen twenties which had granted legislative and controlling powers to the central representative body in Batavia called the Peoples' Council, with new reforms broadening the elective basis and the powers of this Peoples' Council. The Commission mentioned before was instituted to start the preparation of these reforms.

So, as enhanced nationalism would have been a natural consequence of this war even without specific Japanese propaganda, the Dutch were ready to meet it with constructive measures. Queen Wilhelmina's Pearl Harbor Day speech in 1942 promised a round-table conference right after the war to elaborate a new political structure in which the Indies would attain a status equal to the Netherlands in a Commonwealth in which it would have a full partnership.

But Japanese propaganda interfered, not only stimulating Indonesian nationalism but exciting, distorting and poisoning it, turning it into racial hatred.

At this point let me refer to a recently published book called "Asia for the Asiatics" by Robert Ward, in which the author de-



scribes Japanese propaganda as he saw it working in Hong Kong. His findings agree with the following picture of Japanese propaganda in the Netherlands Indies based on Federal Communications Commission reports and Netherlands East Indies Government reports from Australia.

The Japanese carried on a totalitarian propaganda campaign, anti-white, anti-Allied, anti-colonial, and anti-Dutch. They abolished all former political and cultural societies in the Indies. In their place they organized an all-embracing fascistic organization known by its Japanese name Hokokai to carry on propaganda. This Hokokai was a society with Indonesian membership under the chairmanship of Soekarno though Japanese backstage pulled the strings. The Hokokai had its local branches everywhere in Java. Industries and professions were organized as part of it in public service associations.

For three and one half years, continuously and uncontestedly, the Japanese could propagate their hatreds, either directly to the people or under the guise of this Hokokai.

The Japanese could not win the collaboration of the Indies' regents, princes and other rulers. They appealed to other people. Indonesians who for one reason or another had clashed with the N.E.I. Government in former days, were an easy prey for the Japanese purposes. These people were put to the fore and they knew from experiences how to pull propagandistic strings.

A propagandistic appeal was made to the Indonesian youth, exciting nationalistic feelings and fanning this excitement and distorting nationalism into racialism by anti-white and anti-western propaganda.

There was no possibility of counteracting this propaganda as the Dutch were cut off, put into camps. Even when the Queen, in her speech on Pearl Harbor Day 1942, promised a new political set-up to the Indies, it was practically impossible to get this across to the Indonesian population.

By the time Javanese nationalism was tainted with collaborationism and thoroughly distorted into racialism and anti-westernism, the course of the war made it clear the Japs could not hold the Indies. At that time the Japanese planted the time-bomb of independence for Indonesia.

The Japanese declared Burma and the Philippines independent



in 1943. Why didn't they declare the Indies independent at the same time? Why did they install only a commission to prepare the Indies for independence in April 1945? It was because they did not want to be hampered by premature independence. They knew that unity and ability in Indonesia were not sufficient for independence. But when they were about to be thrown out they planted independence as a time-bomb the explosion of which, they hoped, would hurt the Allies and they didn't mind if it hurt the Indonesians also.

This is why they acknowledged an independent Indonesian Republic two days after their formal surrender and why, in the vacuum of authority in the Indies, during which time neither the British nor the Dutch were ready to take over, they armed an Indonesian minority enabling it to subdue other voices. This armed minority got a month and a half's time to organize and to occupy public buildings and public utilities before the first Allied troops landed in Batavia with a token force of only 2,000 men.

It seems not to be necessary to recite the subsequent happenings in Java. They are still fresh in our memory. Matters went from bad to worse.

All testimonies of former internees concur in that the Japanese maintained law and order very well as long as they felt responsible. But as soon as the Allies arrived and took over with only token forces, the Japanese-armed extremist groups and the so-called republic gained ground rapidly. Anyone with an elementary knowledge of the Orient knows how initial disturbances spread rapidly amongst the uncritical and excitable crowds if a strong government is not there to maintain law and order. Lack of food, driving sections of the agrarian population toward the cities, had aggravated this situation. Demoralization as an inevitable consequence of the war had made this kindling wood more inflammable. The former counter-balance present in the Indies' *traditional* structure did not function anymore as it was partly, and in many areas even wholly, abrogated by the Japanese. In their stead Japanese and collaborators who had much to gain by this situation, were ready to fan the flames ignited by the shocking experiences of the war years.

As far as the Dutch are concerned, the liberation of the Indies came too soon after the liberation of the Netherlands in Europe.



After five years of occupation and starvation in Europe the Dutch, alas, could not be ready in three months to take over the Indies and to disarm and intern the Japanese.

We can leave unanswered the question whether the Javanese collaborators were influenced by sympathy with the Japanese and with the Japanese aims to incorporate Indonesia into a Japanese-led Asiatic bloc. Even if these collaborators have been influenced by considerations of expediency, practicing Japanese collaboration in the hope of getting independence ultimately, even then they cannot wash their hands of co-responsibility for the stupendous crimes the Japanese perpetrated against the Indonesian population itself in the form of requisitioning of rice and subsequent starvation, and deportation of slave-labor from Java to the outer districts where maltreatment resulted in wholesale death of thousands upon thousands. Neither can these collaborators wash their hands of Allied losses in so far as these were inevitably enhanced directly or indirectly by their collaboration.

It has to be conceded, and subsequent events prove it has to be deplored at the same time, that when Japanese surrender was near and the Japanese made overtures to really install independence, as a time bomb, non-collaborationist Javanese joined hands with those who were tainted with collaboration. The motives of these new partners in the establishment of the so-called republic Indonesia may have been manifold. Certainly nationalist sentiment has taken a large share in their motives. They were ignorant as to the post war plans of the Netherlands, and consequently they may have wanted trump-cards in their hands against a return of the pre-war status. These new partners may have had the mistaken conviction, furthermore, that Indonesian ability and unity were up to independence of a country spread over an area larger than the U.S.A. with 70 million inhabitants belonging to 250 odd different groups, certainly a tremendous task.

Whatever the motives of these men might have been, subsequent events prove that their cooperation in the "republic" could not make up for the deficiencies in the set-up. Only a pure, a well organized, responsible and able nationalism, potent enough to control its local branches, would have been able to guard the country against the shocking occurrences since the Japanese surrender. But nothing of the kind is there.

Nationalism in Java now is partly turning into racial hysteria. Defenseless women and children in camps are shot at. Tens of thousands of Eurasians and Christian Indonesians are persecuted, thrown in jail all over Java, they are slowly and surely starved and a great many are murdered. The Chinese are not safe either, at any moment outbursts against them may occur. What is happening is of course not representative of the large majority of the Indonesians. Neither is it representative of the moderate nationalists who are in the so-called republic.

Here we touch another bad point in the situation. Terroristic methods prevail. There is no such thing as free speech, those who disagree, the independent Javanese, are put in jail, or disappear entirely. The present situation is a far cry from democracy. The so-called republic does not really control any group. Communist and fascist extremist youth corps mixed up with a certain amount of gangsterism are locally in control. Chaos is setting in.

It should be kept in mind however that the movement, if the chaotic situation can be called "a movement," seems to be predominantly Javanese. Sumatra appears to be affected less, Borneo, Celebes and the other Eastern islands practically not at all.

The Dutch are confident that the unfortunate and very regrettable happenings in the Indies will gradually give way to an establishing of contact with those nationalists who loathe terroristic methods. They form a majority of the nationalists, although they have as yet not been able to assert themselves. Recent happenings would seem to indicate that the violence of the movement is subsiding. Our hope is that increasing reasonableness will enable these nationalists to assert their influence.

Pure nationalism is safe in the hands of the Dutch. They would be a queer people indeed if this were not so, for it was religion and nationalism which provided them with the force to withstand the Germans and to emerge once more a free people.

The Dutch wish to return to the Indies is not based on their material interests over there. These interests can take care of themselves. Dutch as well as British, American and other investments have brought an income to the Indonesian population larger than would have been theirs without Western enterprise. Java's population would not have been able to maintain its subsistence level without western enterprise. The Dutch did not derive more profits



from their investments in the Indies than from other investments or than other nations derive from their investments abroad. It is furthermore characteristic of Dutch trade and investment in the Indies that it has been built up under conditions of free competition without any preference for Dutch enterprise. This is the reason why large amounts of non-Dutch capital are invested in the Indies. This system of free trade guaranteed to the native population the best of what they needed for the lowest prices and the best prices for their produce.

Dutch and other non-native enterprises in the Indies can flourish and need not necessarily go out of business under a non-Dutch administration as long as this administration is able to maintain law and order and does not start expropriating foreign investments. In this connection it must be mentioned as an example of "republican" behavior, that the Goodyear factory in Buitenzorg (Java) is seized and run by the "nationalists." The boss is a former Indonesian clerk in the labor department of the factory; the output is 2% of the prewar output. The plants and oil pits of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey in Palembang are also seized by the "nationalists" and are not accessible to the officers of the Company.

The Dutch wish to return to the country is based on moral grounds. The Dutch perceive among the nationalists an over-emphasis on political independence and an insufficient appreciation of the fact that economic development is the first essential. Indonesia as yet lacks adequate technical, commercial and cultural leadership to make independence a reality. The Dutch honestly believe their responsibility for Indonesian development is not at an end. They are convinced that cooperation within a Netherlands Commonwealth offers the best solution. That was the gist of Queen Wilhelmina's plan, pledged on Pearl Harbor day in 1942 promising Indonesia an equal status and full partnership within a Netherlands Commonwealth.

In the Netherlands Indies important issues are at stake.

If the Javanese are to take the place of the Dutch as the leaders of the whole of Indonesia, it is clear to anyone who has been out there that such a course of action cannot lead to anything but chaos and constant fighting against tribes who would be anxious to free themselves from the Javanese. Even in Java rifts would occur. Balkanization would ensue. Indonesian unity rested largely on the



unifying force of the Netherlands, who this time after what it went through in Europe, could not prepare in time to meet this crisis.

Democracy is also at stake in the Indies. The Dutch brought democracy to the Indies in selfgoverning local, provincial and central councils in which representatives of all groups participated. I myself am responsible for the establishment of local and provincial bodies throughout the Indies in which the art of democracy was learned and appreciated by many Indonesians and I can testify out of my own experience how much perspective there was in this democratic evolution. The Japanese however did away with this, and supported by collaborators they planted fascistic organizations which just as in Germany captured the minds of the youth and of the workers in the cities. The fascistic origins of this so-called "republic Indonesia" are unmistakable.

Social issues are also at stake. The seizure of privately-owned plants bears this out.

Extremist fascistic groups terrorize the large majority of the moderate nationalists. These fascist groups are filled, by the Japanese, full of race hatred. They are locally in control.

In the meanwhile food shortage if not famine sets in for the large majority of law-abiding Javanese, and the lives of thousands upon thousands of former prisoners of war and internees, men, women and children, and other thousands of extremist-jailed Eurasian, Christian-Indonesians, and Indonesians who do not agree with the independence movement, are in constant danger.<sup>1</sup> They are virtually hostages. Extremists have threatened to slaughter them. These people have to bear this after what the Japs did to them. They are in a situation comparable with, if not worse than that of the internees of German and Japanese concentration camps. While the German and Japanese perpetrators of these crimes are being persecuted and executed now, the very acts are perpetrated by terrorists in Java.

The Dutch are confident that the present Japanese and collaborationist-inspired hysteria going on in Java is a temporary aberration of extremist and terrorist minority groups and has to be distinguished well from the nationalism of the great majority. If we do

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<sup>1</sup> The Swiss Government representative in Batavia has said: "The world must do something. Extremists regard the fact that a person's skin is white as sufficient reason to murder him. Many of my own countrymen have been imprisoned or killed, and the fate of many others is unknown."



not shun taking the measures which the situation requires, if we apply a liberal, but also a just and strong hand, the pure nationalism of the great majority will appear out of this chaos, democratic and constructive, and not excluding the Chinese and Dutch groups which have lived in the Indies for centuries. Another policy would be an injustice not only to the Dutch and non-natives born in the Indies, but foremost against the large Indonesian majority which cannot exert its rightful influence now. The Dutch will be glad to meet this pure democratic and constructive nationalism, and to give the right of way to its driving force and enthusiasm.

A policy of independence now could not solve any of the problems mentioned. It would add other problems to the present ones.

Unfortunately the growing processes of dependent peoples sometimes go through periods of violence. This is not peculiar to the Netherlands Indies alone. In the Philippines during the so-called "insurrection" in the beginning of this century when the Americans took over from the Spaniards, and elsewhere, the same thing happened. In this case it is rather apparent that the disturbances in Java are to be regarded, at least in part, as a continuation of the war against Japan. Nationalist youth organizations who create the main trouble in Java, are armed by the Japanese, they are Japanese-trained, Japanese-led, Japanese-infiltrated. U. S. Army Intelligence<sup>1</sup> has disclosed that the Japanese have trained agents to disturb the relations between South East Asiatic peoples and Western countries as soon as they saw victory slipping out of their hands.

The Japanese are out for governments in South East Asia with back doors open to Japan. In the case of Java the Japanese have their eyes on some very valuable resources which are unique in the Far East and that the Japanese will again need if the time comes for them to assume once more a southward drive.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Brigadier General Elliot R. Thorpe in an article in the New York Times of November 11, 1945.